

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A1-10

THE WASHINGTON POST
25 March 1980

Panamanians: Flight Was Mistake

Sources Charge Shah's Departure Triggered by U.S. 'Agents'

By Karen DeYoung

Washington Post Foreign Service

PANAMA CITY, March 24 — High-level Panamanian authorities today described the sudden flight of the deposed shah of Iran as a desperate and mistaken act triggered by false reports that Panama was preparing either to arrest the former monarch or to allow him to die in a local hospital.

Those reports were fed to former shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi here in recent weeks by "agents" of prominent Americans intent on embarrassing the Carter administration, according to these sources, who are close to Panama's ruler, Gen. Omar Torrijos.

Former secretary of state Henry A. Kissinger and banker David Rockefeller were named by these sources as having played key roles, through intermediaries, in persuading the former

shah to leave Panama for Egypt before formal extradition hearings scheduled to have begun today. Rockefeller and Kissinger have strongly denied having any role in the former shah's decision.

The Panamanian version of the past several weeks leading up to the shah's departure is a tangled story of intrigue, manipulation by outsiders and good intentions by Torrijos and his aides. They are portrayed as having mounted a frenzied last-minute negotiating effort that included a promise to Iran to "do something to make sure the shah stayed here" if Iran could offer a "spectacular" concession relating to the U.S. hostages in Tehran.

That effort failed, even though White House chief of staff Hamilton Jordan sought to bolster it by speaking on the telephone from Panama to

Iranian Foreign Minister Sadegh Ghotbzadeh, according to these sources. White House press secretary Jody Powell said in Washington last night that he had no indication that Jordan had spoken with any Iranian official during his weekend trip to Panama.

Meanwhile, the Panamanians said, Jordan arrive Thursday with information from "U.S. intelligence sources" that the shah had been in contact with Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, and had accepted an invitation to move to that country.

On Friday, they said, that information was officially confirmed in a telephone call from the wife of the Egyptian ambassador to Washington, Ashraf Ghorbal, to Carter's national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski.

Panamanian officials here said the operation was scheduled for April 6 at 3 a.m. by DeBakey and his team.

But by the time White House legal counsel Lloyd Cutler flew to Contadora to talk with the shah Friday night the Panamanians said, "the shah's had already been made."

"He was afraid," the Panamanians maintained. Despite a series of visits "from [Panamanian president Aristides] Royo, from Torrijos, and near constant telephone calls" from both "trying again and again to reassure him" that Panama had no intention of arresting him or giving in to an Iranian request for his extradition, "Armao kept telling him that the Panamanian National Guard could send a plane to pick him up any time," Panamanian officials said.

When Torrijos flew to Contadora to visit the shah Saturday, said one official on the trip, Pahlavi "looked very sick. It was very hot, but the entire house was closed up, all the doors and windows, and he had on long sleeves, his whole body covered up. His hand was clammy and feverish. The only thing he had on his mind was Egypt, Egypt."

The Panamanian sources displayed open sympathy for the Carter administration, with which they hope to continue good relations. Torrijos reportedly believes Kissinger and Rockefeller wanted to make life very difficult for Carter. "They succeeded in doing just that," an official said. "Carter is right in the middle of electoral problems."

* * * *

EXCERPTED